Page Layout & Design

Overview

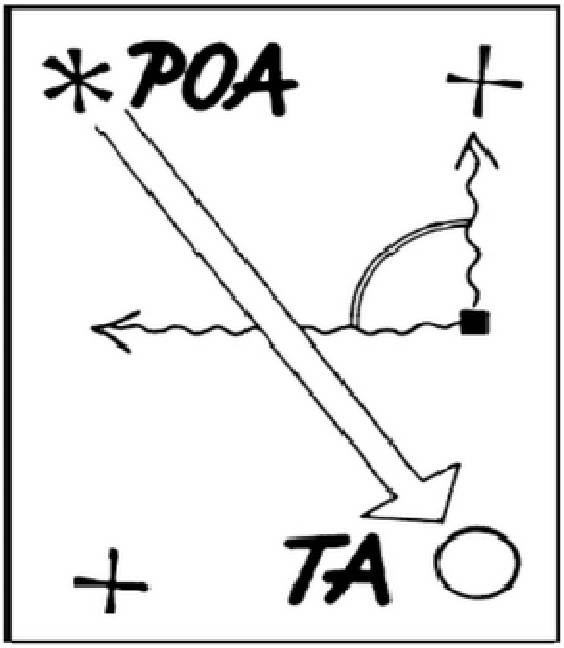
The purpose of communicating with any stakeholder is to build understanding, but there is a huge gap between the stakeholder looking at your written message and fully understanding its contents! A well designed document can communicate up to 80% more information to its reader than a badly designed document.

The *PMBOK® Guide* differentiates between the *message*, what you want to communicate, the *medium*, the way you send the message and *noise*, things that interfere with comprehension[1]. The concept of noise disrupting communication is easy to appreciate when you are talking with a stakeholder either face to face or via a conferencing system, what many people fail to appreciate is the same principles apply to written communication including, emails, letters, web pages, the visual aspects of presentations[2] and reports. In the context of written documents noise includes mess, clutter, unnecessary embellishments and poor 'work-flow' that makes reading difficult.

The concept of layout design is separate from content design. Good document design will not overcome badly written content[3]; but a poorly designed document will significantly reduce your reader's comprehension of the message you are trying to convey.

Key Design Elements

Page layout



Gutenberg diagram[4]

[1] For a brief overview of ***communication theory*** see: see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1066_Communcation_Theory.pdf

[2] For more on ***presentation layouts*** see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1009_Presentation_Skills.pdf

[3] For more on ***effective writing*** see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1010_Writing_Skills.pdf

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The (western) eye starts naturally at the top left of a page at the Primary Optical Area and flows down to exit bottom right at the Terminal Anchor point. A document design that ignores this flow disrupts the natural reading pattern and reduces comprehension.

The top left corner is the 'primary optical area' and should contain your key message. Images that support the message are best placed in the top right corner or bottom left corner of the page; these are the areas of lowest attention, the flow could conclude or link to another page at the TA. Layouts that force the eye to move against this natural flow are hard to follow and reduce the effectiveness of the message. A page layout with columns works as a series of pages with each column being treated as a 'page' by the eye. Layouts that broadly conform to the reading gravitational principles had a 70% comprehension level; layouts that ignored it saw the comprehension level drop to 35%.

Clutter

Multiple fonts, font sizes and colours may create a great visual impression but fail the communication test. Generally, Serif fonts such as Times Roman are easiest to read in the body of a document (serif refers to the little squiggles at the end of letters), Sans Serif fonts such as Ariel look cleaner in headlines. Use one of each with minimal embellishment to reduce noise.

Where the text is small or the resolution relatively low such as web screens, the cleaner Sans Serif font is necessary for effective reproduction: as this piece of text demonstrates.

Colour

Small amounts of colour used as a highlight make documents attractive but the best combination for understanding quantities of text is a boring black font on white background. Coloured fonts reduce comprehension and coloured backgrounds reduce comprehension. The further the selected combination of font and background colour moves from black text on white background, the lower the level of comprehension[5]. Printing coloured text over a background picture can reduce comprehension by a massive 90%.

It's also important to remember that colours can have different meanings in different cultures. For example, the colour red symbolises luck and celebration in China, but it's the colour of mourning in South Africa. The colour green is now commonly used by environmentally friendly companies or eco-warriors, but in the USA, it symbolises money and in Malaysia, green symbolises danger.

Colour is particularly important for documents (pages) displayed on a web site such as a 'project portal'. To make your document effective, you need to take into consideration your target audience. Some useful considerations include:

- **Colour contrast:** use different text and background colours for the best contrast that won't result in eye strain. A black background and white text can look classy, but it's hard on the eyes. Black and orange also work well together, but keep the layout clean and use white to balance out the orange and black, otherwise the page might seem too dark and gloomy.
- **Patterns:** avoid using a patterned background behind the text as it's hard to read.
- **Limit the number of colours used:** The fewer colours you use, the better. Use 2-3 key colours and keep it consistent with your corporate branding.
- **Don't be afraid to use white space:** some of the best websites feature a lot of white space to make the graphic or call to action stand out.

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[4] Guttenberg Diagram – E.C. Arnold, Arnold's Ancient Axiom, Regan Report Press, 1978

[5] Source: ***WYSIWYG***: B. Doyle, Micro Planner Conference 1979, quoting: C. Wheildon, ***Communication – or just making pretty shapes***; Newspaper Advertising Bureau.

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- **Use 'Web smart' colours:** web browsers render colours differently. Make sure that the colours you choose for your website are 'web smart' that can be viewed on Macs, PCs and the most popular web browsers.
- **Use bold colours to emphasis a point:** Consider bolding your main heading and using a different colour to draw emphasis and tell the reader at a glance what the page is about.

Diagrams

A picture can 'speak a 1000 words' and well used diagrams and pictures will enhance the overall effect of the document. Diagrams tend to attract the eye first so need to be places carefully within the overall flow of a document. Care is needed to ensure the 'symbolic language' of the picture is unambiguous and the diagram will be interpreted in the way intended[6].

Overall Page Design

The page should not be too wide, 50 to 80 characters maximum, leave plenty of white space at the margins, between paragraphs and around images, place key messages in headlines, use diagrams wisely to reinforce your message and caption them effectively.

If columns are used to constrain the width, they should not be too narrow, 25 characters is an effective minimum; ideally the text length should be in the range of 40 to 50 characters for optimum comprehension.

Justification looks tidy but tends to be detrimental to understanding due to the varying spacing between letters from row to row (kerning) in single column layouts such as this White Paper. If columns are introduced to the document, justification significantly increases comprehension. However, if justification is used, ensure the kerning does not cram letters too close together.

Headings and sub-headings are important for comprehension – readers do not like large slabs of unbroken text and the combination of headings and images provide anchor points to help the reader navigate through the document.

Grammar, punctuation and information flow

The way your message is presented also affects comprehension. Writing skills are discussed in WP1010[7].

Conclusion

Designing an effective document layout is an art, you need to balance making the document attractive with colour and images (which is often necessary to get people to look at it in the first place), with making the information in the document easy to read and understand. Multi page documents can benefit from a 'flashy' first page designed to attract attention and engage interest, backed up by subsequent pages designed to communicate your message effectively.

Overall the design should create a visually appealing document that is balanced, harmonious and 'together' with each element of the design contributing to the overall communication.

First published 24th June 2011, augmented and updated.

[6] For more on the ***language of symbols*** see: http://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2014/08/15/mind-your-language/

[7] For more on ***writing skills*** see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1010_Writing_Skills.pdf

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